

## **Submit to One Another, Part 2**

### **“In Your Marriage”**

Ephesians 5:21-33

<sup>21</sup>Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

We must obey this simple command if we wish to walk in harmony with God’s eternal purposes:

“And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment – to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ” (chapter 1:9,10).

God is bringing all things together that sin tore apart. God desires to showcase to the world His restorative power in and through the church. This is a major theme of Ephesians. When Paul wrote, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ,” he was commanding the whole household of faith to deny themselves on behalf of others so that the community of Christ might reflect the unity that God has authored. Mutual submission is the foundational premise for this section of the letter.

The application to marriage of mutual submission begins with the words: “Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife ...” It should come as no surprise that our culture cringes at those words, but I’m more concerned that some of you just cringed. I feel like I would prefer to teach this text behind a screen or dressed as a hockey goalie.

When I teach this passage to young couples in premarital counseling, I always ask the young woman to read aloud the verses about submitting to her husband. If she rushes, I ask her to start over and read slowly. It’s not really a teaching technique. Actually, I just do it for kicks. Usually, she just looks very uncomfortable, even annoyed, for it runs contrary to everything the world has told her. She’s a Christian and allegedly believes the Bible, but she just doesn’t agree with that.

Of course, turnabout is fair-play. I ask the young man to read the part about husbands loving their wives as Christ loves the church. I don’t get the same squirming from him that I get from the young lady. In fact, he usually thinks it all sounds wonderful. But often, I do get the sense that this poor, young sap is absolutely clueless as to what Paul is really calling him to do.

But, I also find that when young people do explore this passage, they walk away with a sense that God, the Author of marriage, really does understand how it best works. That’s important to grasp these days. Marriage has been under attack for decades. Feminism tried to undermine traditional roles in marriage. The “no fault” approach to divorce allegedly took the sting out of something that God Himself finds stinging and heartbreaking. Now the gay marriage push is on. That’s not a threat to marriage in the obvious sense. It will cause no one to rethink what marriage is. Rather, in nations where it has been embraced, marriages simply decrease while promiscuity and cohabitation increase.

The Creator of marriage is the only true expert on the topic, and He says that the highest in marriage is only attained when Jesus is revered as the Lord of life. Actually, in the world to which Paul spoke, marriage was in greater peril than it is today. But, Christianity swept the ancient world, and marriages were infused with purity, kindness and faithfulness. Strengthening marriage may seem like an uphill battle, but living by God’s standards will make us equal to the task. The last thing the world needs is for Christians to blush or recoil from what God says that marriages ought to look like.

I read that marriage is when you agree to spend the rest of your life sleeping in a room that's too warm, beside someone who's sleeping in a room that's too cold." That's not bad. Think about it. Marriage is best worked out when two people are willing to bend, or as Paul wrote, "Submit to one another," or "arrange yourself under" another. There is a sense in which Christian wives **AND** husbands are to "submit to one another" as each expresses reverence for Christ.

## **I. How Does a Christian Wife Express Submission to Her Husband? (22-24)**

<sup>22</sup>Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. <sup>23</sup>For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. <sup>24</sup>Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

### **A. Paul's View of Marriage (and Women) Seems Elusive to Some**

Socrates counseled, "By all means marry; if you get a good wife, you'll become happy. If you get a bad one, you'll become a philosopher." Some find some of Paul's teachings on marriage similarly cynical. Our text today may be the highest treatment of marriage ever penned, but, in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul seems almost coldly pragmatic. Paul gloried in his own gift of celibacy. He felt that this gave him the opportunity to serve Christ with no family distractions and he wished that everyone could be like him. But, since few people were celibate, Paul taught that they were better off to marry than to burn with lust and end up sinning sexually. Marriage is almost depicted as a necessary evil.

Of course, Corinth was the home of an immature, carnal and spiritually self-deluded mess of a church. Complicating matters was the fact that Corinth itself was a sensual and hedonistic mess of a town. Perhaps, some of these characters were trying to follow Paul's lead, biting off celibacy as a spiritual badge of honor. The problem may have been that they could not follow Paul's example of purity. What good is it to claim to be wed only to God if one cannot keep oneself pure? Most of the Corinthians were not wired like Paul to be celibate, so marriage was preferable to fornication.

I can only speculate as to the specific issues in Corinth, but in any event, there is ample evidence for concluding that Corinth was, in many ways, a unique case study among New Testament churches. Ephesians is a very general letter. It could have been written to any church in any age. Through the work of Jesus, on a stage that is the Church in the world, Jesus is restoring Eden's beauty to all things made ugly by the Fall. Ephesians spells out Paul's high view of marriage, which is quite remarkable.

### **B. What Does Paul Actually Say to Wives?**

Section breaks in the Bible are helpful, but they are not inspired. Sometimes, breaks interrupt thoughts that belong together. One such break is between verses 21 and 22 of our text. In the original, the two verses are part of one sentence. The word "submit" does not even appear in verse 22. It is supplied as a continuation of the thought of verse 21, or, literally, "**submitting** to one another in the fear of Christ, the wives to their own husbands ..." "Submit" is the correct word to translate verse 22. We just would not know that without verse 21. The treatment of the submission of a wife to her husband emerges from a main premise that believers are to "submit to one another."

Paul was anything but oppressive towards women when we place his words in their historical setting. Greek wives existed to raise a man's legitimate heirs. There was little affection in marriage for the typical Greek man found his companionship elsewhere. The Jews had a higher view of marriage on paper, but in practice, things were quite different. A man could divorce his wife and leave her destitute on a whim. Get some rabbi to properly word a divorce decree and "Mama was outta there!"

This world has never seen a greater champion of human rights or the dignity of women than Paul. This was not because he propagated some weak and destructive social agenda like feminism. It was because he called all of God's people to live on behalf of others "out of reverence for Christ."

### **C. The Husband Is the Head of the Wife**

When sinful people think of "headship," they are so governed by pride and self-will that they can think only in terms of "authority" rather than of God-given "roles." We think of "heads of government," "heads of industry" and "corporate heads." Who is clearly in charge and who is not in charge? That's all that registers. How unfortunate! Jesus is the Head of the church. He threw His weight around by washing the feet of His disciples on the night before He died in their place.

Paul is emphasizing the oneness of a body unit, not mere hierarchy. "For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body..." It's a simple picture. The Christian home is to have features of the church in miniature. The head does carry authority, but it is neither driven by nor defined by authority. The Head of the church is defined by His loving provision. The Greek word for "head" also referred to the source or origin of a thing. The church was brought forth from the wounds of Jesus much as the woman was created from the wounded side of Adam. The emphasis is on God's structure, not on raw power. Paul simply calls wives to recognize what God has ordained.

Obviously, the word "head" is potentially abrasive. What should godly "headship" look like?

## **II. How Does a Christian Husband Express Submission to His Wife? (25-32)**

### **A. "Husbands, love your wives ..." verse 25a**

Men can be a little thickheaded about this whole notion loving their wives selflessly. Consider what transpires when a typical husband offers to give his wife a break by cooking dinner on the grill:

- 1) The wife goes to the store.
- 2) The wife fixes the salad, vegetables, and dessert.
- 3) The wife seasons the meat, puts it on a tray and delivers it to the husband, who is lounging near the grill.
- 4) The man places the meat on the grill.
- 5) The wife goes inside to set the table.
- 6) The wife warns the husband that the meat is burning.
- 7) The husband takes the meat off the grill and hands it to his wife.
- 8) After the meal, the woman clears the table and does the dishes.
- 9) Everyone praises the husband for the wonderful meal.
- 10) The husband asks his wife how she enjoyed "her night off." Upon seeing her scowl, he concludes that there's just no pleasing some women.

God's design for human relationships is "mutual submission." A godly wife will cede the headship of the marriage to her husband, not because he's a prize, but out of obedience to Jesus. But what does a godly husband placing himself beneath the best interest of his wife look like? It must look like love.

Sin marred everything. In Genesis 3:16, God announced what the couple's sin had wrought upon His creation. We call it the Fall. He described what sin had done to marriage when He told Eve, "Your **desire** will be for your husband and he will **rule** over you." "Desire" meant a desire to possess or control. The word is used in Genesis 4 of sin's "desire" to control Cain who was fuming over the LORD's acceptance of Abel's sacrifice. Eve's desire for Adam was not a noble passion. Eden's bliss was exchanged for "the battle of the sexes," each gender vying for dominance.

Through the ages, some men have used the rhetoric of the curse on creation to argue that a man should be "king of his castle." Obviously, the woman angrily recoils and feels justified in doing it. It's all mindless in that it plays into the hand of the curse. The "curse" describes what went wrong with a perfect creation because of sin. That's why it's called "the curse." God's program is to restore His creation from the effects of the curse. We need to work for God's ideal in marriage, not argue for the curse upon it as though it the norm for creation. Jesus came to "reverse the curse," not to mainstream it. God is not to be blamed for any woman's "desire" or for any husband's "rule" over his wife.

## **B. "Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church ..." verses 25-30**

Today, we call a million emotions "love." Paul uses *agapao*, which refers to a selfless, willful resolve to love another. It describes the love of Jesus throughout the New Testament. In fact, Paul insists that a husband's love for his wife be nothing less than the love of Christ for His Own Bride. The passion of romance might be exciting, but it does not satisfy love's demands. I read that every woman deserves to feel like she's married to an archaeologist: "The older she gets, the better he likes her."

### **1) What does loving as Christ loved demand? verses 25, 26**

... and gave himself up for her <sup>26</sup>to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word ...

Jesus loved His church by dying for her. He cleansed her "by water." Baptism seems to be likened to some sort of a ceremonial purification bath that ancient brides underwent in many Gentile cultures. Christ also cleansed His church "through the word." This could refer to our confession of faith in Christ, without which baptism is nothing. Or, it could refer to the promise of Christ to His people that we are His. The gist of the verse is clear. The love of Christ is not some frivolous emotion like so many things we call love. Christ loved us by dying for us and preparing us to be His bride.

### **2) What does such love bring to pass? verse 27**

... <sup>27</sup>and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

To be presented to Christ does not mean to grovel at His feet. It means we are presented by Himself to Himself to stand by Him as a bride. The church is limitlessly loved, treasured and honored by Jesus. It follows that a man's wife is to be limitlessly loved, treasured and honored by her husband.

### **3) What does this mean in "down to earth" language? verses 28-32**

... <sup>28</sup>In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. <sup>29</sup>After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church - <sup>30</sup>for we are members of his body. <sup>31</sup>"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." <sup>32</sup>This is a profound mystery - but I am talking about Christ and the church.

"Ought" is a tense of the verb "to owe." This does not mean, "Wouldn't it be swell if a husband loved his own wife?" Love is owed by a husband to his wife because Jesus taught, modeled and commanded it. That's sobering. What Jesus did for His bride out of a desire to perfect her is "owed" in God's eyes by every believing husband. Paul's posture is that it is exceedingly dumb for a man not to love his wife, for in God's eyes, she is part of him. This is how the story goes:

<sup>21</sup>So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. <sup>22</sup>Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

<sup>23</sup>The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man."

<sup>24</sup>For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. - Genesis 2:21-24

Paul quotes the last verse of that passage. From Adam's side, God created Eve, and He joined them together. Paul's word for "leave" is an intensified form of leave meaning "leave behind." The root of the word "united" is "glue." In God's eyes, a man is united, glued, cemented, or joined to his wife. They become "one flesh," one body. There is no more sacred human priority than marriage.

Finally, Paul speaks of this "joining" as a "profound mystery," something hidden for ages, but now made known. The idea that marriage is a sacred union was not news and therefore, was not the mystery Paul was talking about. The notion of marriage as sacred was as old as Genesis. Paul clarifies that he is not talking about the human union of marriage; "I am talking about Christ and the church." The newly disclosed mystery is that even at creation, marriage was intended to be a picture of a perfect eternal union between God and His redeemed people through the work of Christ.

### **Conclusion - A Summary Instruction (33)**

<sup>33</sup>However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

A husband expresses submission to his wife by loving her with the very love demonstrated on the cross by Jesus. She may not be that loveable. That's not the point. Does the church always appear loveable to Jesus? Still, a husband's obedience in this matter is owed to Christ, Who died for His Bride. A wife submits to her husband with "respect." This is a form of the same word translated "reverence" in verse 21. A wife cannot revere her husband in the sense that we all must revere Christ. He'd never live up to that, but the wife must soberly acknowledge her husband's role in view of the divine order of things.

The interaction of a believer with his fellow-believers is an important part of what Christ is currently working to restore. Nowhere does this strike home more closely than in a marriage. To hone a general definition for submission from last week to this context: "Submission is the realization that we are not in a marital relationship for personal benefit only, but for the sake of another as well."